

Joey's Island

by Steven Wood

Loch Morar, Inverness, Scotland. I stood up in the boat and looked round. Some frontal activity to the west and the wind coming on. But here it all was, the enticing miscellany of fishing – rods, flies, gaff, picnic and the rest of it. Get moving!

I stepped forward to free the mooring rope, and glimpsed a figure biking towards me. I looked again. The figure was a boy. Zoink! I left the rope tied and waited. He stopped casually alongside and looked the boat and me over – right thigh resting on the crossbar, foot dangling.

“Hello,” I said. A nod.

“Who are you?”

“Joey Taylor. That boat's no good.”

So this boy was an authority. A delectable authority as luck (good or bad?) would have it. Sharp little face (my kind), neat hands, red shirt hanging out, tight fitting black cord trousers, shocking green socks and the universal trainers.

“Why no good, Joey?” I asked.

“A-a-ach, it's a heavy old tub. Needs two people really.”

Zoink again! Did that mean what it seemed to mean? “Yes? In that case you'd better come with me,” I suggested lightly, suppressing the enemy of eagerness. Hazel eyes, light brown hair, pretty unsmiling lips.... “I've got plenty to eat.” A bit of cleverness there, and boosted by a nod at the basket.

“Are you paying?” He fired the question like a missile. Little monster with long dark eyelashes; little tyrant with even white teeth; retroussé-nosed little master of this ship – yes, yes, like that nose; like everything attached to that nose, above, below and sideways. Leadership handed over without a fight. Fifty pence an hour – and very very cheap at the price.

“How old are you, Joey?”

“Eleven.”

“Ask your mother if you can come,” I said. “I'll wait.”

A fierce response. “I don't *need* to ask my mother. I was on my way to my auntie's.”

“Don't you have a mother?” Bafflement setting in now.

“Of *course* I have a mother. *Everybody* has a mother!”

Good grief, there must be boy's logic going on somewhere in here! He locked his bike, freed the rope and pushed us towards the glittering outer water.

“Row,” he ordered from the front of the boat. “And mind you keep a firm grip on the oars.” Joey's voice was another part of Joey's charm; highland cadencing and richly rolling 'r's. Music to me.

Joey fished as if survival depended on it. He stood most of the time while I

sat slow-rowing. We kept to the routine for ages, the boy casting and casting again, and the fish refusing to bite. I was enthralled by the flat tummy, pert bottom and scowling little face of my fisherboy captain.

We drifted towards the fine tree-covered island east of center of the lake.

“Let’s have our picnic on the island,” I proposed.

“Suit yourself,” he said coldly. Those uncooperative fish were souring things. And then, just as we nudged into the island, a trout impaled itself on Joey’s hook. The good lord be praised for one little fish and Joey’s mellowed mood. He smiled and talked, telling me of enormous fish he’d often caught in the past. His language was casually strong – the boyish vernacular of the playground which is better not printed here but which, with delight, I knew meant trust.

On the island we met a young man and his girl, Pete and Debbie. Debbie, a slender creature with bouncing hair, seemed pleased to see us though Pete – who told us he was a medical student – was evidently not; Pete, I decided, had more than medicine or fishing in mind that day.

After a few strained pleasantries I took Joey and the picnic to the far side of the little island.

“Why can’t we stay with them?” he asked.

“Because the young man wants to make love to the young woman,” I said bluntly. “That’s why.”

Joey’s delicate eyebrows arched, and he smiled for the second time. “I’d like to watch them,” he said.

“Have a pie instead,” I advised. “It’s safer.”

He chewed away, standing on tiptoe from time to time peering through the tress vainly for a glimpse of Pete and Debbie embraced.

“D’you think they’re really doing it?” he asked once through a mouthful of ham roll. We were both aroused – Joey by thoughts of them, I by thoughts of him. As they rightly say, it takes all kinds... We finished lunch with a wrestling bout which did good for us both.

When we left to start fishing our way back to the mainland we made an alarming discovery. I couldn’t make headway against the strengthening wind. We both crouched low in the boat – Joey right down on the floor at times – and I rowed till the sweat poured off me, but it wasn’t enough. On the far side of the loch, beyond the island, lay wild, uninhabited country with craggy hills and lowering clouds – no place to be blown.

I steered back to our island haven in embarrassed search of trainee-doctor Pete. When we found him he was looking angry and the girl had moved away, sitting on a tree stump. There had been some kind of mishap here and I thought Pete might be ready to try to row back with me in search of a power boat for a grand rescue scene.

But Pete saw it differently. “The wind will drop,” he said. “Hang around for a while – you know, over there.” He pointed to the distance.

I could read his mood through his eyes. A night on the island with Debbie

was entirely okay by him. One thing was clear – the wind wouldn't drop, and it didn't. It grew stronger.

“Joey,” I said in a while, risking an arm round his shoulder, “we're going to be stuck here all night. What about your mother now? She'll worry.”

“I live with my mother sometimes and my auntie sometimes,” he answered. “They'll just think I'm with the other one.”

His mother was widowed, his aunt unmarried. He roamed to and fro between the two tiny cottages, a blithely free spirit, very much his own boy. Some character I'd found in Joey Taylor.

I began to see events Pete's way. A night on the island with Joey. Zoink, zoink, zoink!

“We'll have to make a little shelter for ourselves,” I said. “Then we'll huddle together to keep warm.”

“Let's all stay together,” Joey answered. “The four of us.”

“Look, you little idiot – you *know* we can't do that! Pete wants Debbie alone, doesn't he? Show a bit of sense.”

Debbie called us over to share a pot of smoky tea. Most of the chat was between Debbie and me, covering for the scowls of Pete and Joey.

Pete chose his moment to have a throaty murmur in my ear. “What's that kid to you?” he said – and I didn't like the knowing pitch of voice at all, nor the smirky smile the words came through. He seemed to have guessed, but how? A look of mine perhaps too keen and longing, a touch of hands too fond, a smile too strained? Meaningful signs to readers of the code.

“Joey?” I parried carefully. “He's just a local kid. Offered to row for me. Pocket money short, you know – the usual thing.”

“Yeah? Well, keep him well away. I've been after that bird since Tuesday. She's a teaser, see. I've had the aches all day, the bitch, and tonight she's going to get it – oh, brother, is she going to get it!” He sniggered and gave me a nudge. A very coarse display. Some budding doctor, I thought.

“I'll keep Joey out of your way,” I promised coldly.

“I bet you will.” The smirk again, which I turned away from quickly.

We dragged the boats ashore spaced well apart and tilted them up on their sides for shelter. Joey and I made a mattress of dry fern that we pulled up and layered. Dusk came early to the island.

“Come on, Joey, I murmured. “Let's see if we can get some sleep – it's been a tiring day. Lie down, head inside the boat and I'll pull my anorak over us like a blanket.

“I need a pee,” he said, and stepped away. “So do I.” I stood beside him.

Predictably he turned to hide his front – but I caught glimpses, and even a glimpse was something.

We returned to the boat. He lay first on his back then, as I tucked my coat round the two of us, rolled onto his left side. I snuggled up from behind against his curves.

Bliss. Temptation. Excitement. Fantasies, Innocent joy. I could smell the

boyish bouquet from the nape of his soft neck. My nose touched his hair – delight on the edge of delirium. Senses like appetites vary and mine were wonderfully sharpened. I could hear his heart, see him clearly in the darkness. Exotic scents came from the damp lushness of the island; fern scent, damp earth scent, wild flowers scent subtly mingling with boy scent – with, essence of Joey. Paraisaical minutes – linger on each precious moment, waste nothing of this, nothing.

He wriggled a bit and scratched, then slowly took on the breathing rhythm of sleep. I placed my right hand gently on his slight, cord-trousered leg beside me, feeling the knee at front and back, then moving on, and up and up, then back again towards the treasured knee.

Unexpectedly, he elbowed my arm away. “You’re making me hot,” he said, sleepy but irritable.

“You’re lucky to be hot,” I retorted feebly, caught off guard.

I lay for a while pondering on the rebuff – and most carelessly allowed myself to sleep; not for long I’m sure, but when I woke Joey wasn’t with me. At once I decided the little wretch had gone to spy on Pete and Debby, and began to struggle to my feet. Then I saw him. Joey was sitting by the front of the boat, a dejected little figure in the darkness. Moonlight showed up his hair riffling in the wind.

“What’s the matter, Joey?” I asked.

“I’m all itchy and I can’t sleep.”

Before I could reply we heard a man’s voice calling out in anger. “Come back, you silly bitch!” Pete’s voice, of course. Then Debbie stumbled sobbing towards us and knelt beside me.

“Make him leave me alone,” she gasped. “He’s a maniac.”

Pete came crashing after her, naked but for manly little jockey shorts.

Nervously, I stood between the two. “Leave it, Pete,” I urged. “She’s not going to play, and that’s that.”

He stood, large fists clenched, chest heaving and body half crouched. The moment of crisis passed.

“Let’s take one of the boats across now,” I said. “We can make it together and get help.”

He dressed, and we launched his boat.

“That bloody bitch had it coming to her,” he raved as we rowed strongly for the shore. “If you and the kid hadn’t been there she’d have had the arse screwed off her.”

“That would have been rape, Pete,” I pointed out. “You’d have got five years for that at a guess.”

Harsh laughter from Pete. “Yeah? They’d have had to catch me first, wouldn’t they?”

“Well, she knows your name, knows you’re a medical student and all that. Shouldn’t be exactly difficult to track you down.”

He stopped rowing and turned to stare at me, derision spread all over his

face. "Were you born yesterday or something?" he asked. "She doesn't know my name and, Christ! I'm not a student – I'm a bloody driver. But I bet I've had more women than you've had breakfasts." More joyless laughter followed the words.

"Row, please," I said. "We're drifting."

But he had one more little outburst to make. "Jesus! She's got my effing watch."

That made me laugh – but silently. Poor savage Pete would have to go back.

We beached the boat and trudged for miles until we found a hamlet and managed to rouse a sleepy boatman. There were touches of dawn in the sky as the three of us sped across the water again under outboard power.

"I'm an older man than you are," I said to Pete during the trip, "so let me give you a word of advice. Try a gentle approach. It's not only right, it's the best way in the end."

An ironical sermon I suppose in the circumstances of that night, ludicrous when you think about it. But wait – even gut-felt truth can have the timing wrong.

The two of us hopped out of the boat and walked through to the little camp. The sight we saw brought us both to a stop, and to silence.

Joey and Debbie were deeply asleep, clasped in each other's arms and cheek to cheek on the fern bed, partly covered by my anorak.

Pete turned to look at me and, as our eyes met, something wordless but important passed between us. It was insight, I suppose; knowledge gained; a shared glimpse of the utter contrariness of life. Before that moment Pete with the mob would have had me shot, and perhaps would do so again when the memory passed. But for a moment his mind and mine, ten million thought years apart, had met.

The four of us breakfasted at the boatman's cottage, safely across the water, and then split up, good friends, all passions aside.

Joey followed me to my car and leaned against it as I started the engine. "Don't go," he said unexpectedly.

"Thanks, Joey, for that," I said, "but I have to be back in London by tomorrow." I rested my hand on his, and he let it stay there.

Now an even less expected remark. "I want to go with you. There's nothing for me here. Let me come."

A racking silence followed. I tapped his knuckles and stared in stupefied surprise at the sharp and so suddenly eager little face shut out from me by the car door.

"Well, Joey," I said at last, opening the door. "That's something we really *will* have to clear with your mother." And for once Joey agreed.

He is sitting opposite me now, curled up cat-like in my biggest armchair, his role changed from commander of my boat to commander of my television.

I'd say the advice I gave to Pete was good enough.